Lured to the southern Sinai by the legend of its nomadic tribes and biblical landscape, Christine Toomey found more than she bargained for when she went camel-trekking, camped under the stars — and fell under the desert’s spell.

A new moon hung briefly above us before dipping below the horizon, leaving the desert sky shimmering with shooting stars. After just a few minutes of watching these silent, starry games, my daughter whispered to me: “There are so many, I’m running out of wishes to make!”

As we lay side by side in the open air at a small Bedouin encampment in the southern Sinai, those words felt like fleeting confirmation I had raised a reasonably contented child. What more could I have wished for at the start of a journey in the summer when it seemed she was passing from childhood to becoming a young woman? “Nights in the desert are rare opportunities offered to a few,” Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote in his classic book Wind, Sand and Stars, which accompanied us as we set off across a small section of the vast peninsula splitting Africa and Asia at the point that the Red Sea forks into the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez. And as we moved on the following night to camp in a dry wadi, where sand dunes swell like waves against rock cliffs, I realised this was a rare time of shared peace.

As our two Bedouin guides went in search of scrub wood to build a fire to prepare our evening meal, we were left briefly alone. The sun washed the sandstone cliffs pink before setting, leaving the deep basin where we sat a metal grey; the only sound was the rustling sand caught up in gusts of wind. Despite my reservations about taking a teenager used to the conveniences of urban living on such a trip, I found she, and...
I fell quickly into a desert mindset. When we were set the task of keeping the spot where we were bedding down for the night lit, we both set about trying to mimic our Bedouin guides in building improved storm lanterns, cutting empty water bottles in half, partially filling them with sand and sticking in a lit candle before replacing the top to protect the flame.

At the very start of our trip we had packed up our sleeping bags at 3am to climb to the 2,285-metre summit of Mount Sinai – the mountain where Christians, Muslims and Jews believe that God delivered his Ten Commandments to Moses. Starting in the middle of the night meant we would reach the summit to watch dawn break over the furthest reaches of the southern Sinai’s jagged mountain ranges. Since the guidebook had described the climb as “easy except at the summit”, walking seemed a safer prospect than getting on a camel for the first time, in the dark, to go up a mountain.

But while my daughter had leaped ahead like a gazelle, my extra years had made the climb more of a challenge, especially the 750 rocky and uneven steps that scale the last section to its peak. Resting in the shade of St Catherine’s monastery, built on the slope of the mountain at the site of what was believed to be the biblical burning bush, I was only thankful we had not attempted the alternative, more difficult, route to the top a towering ladder of 1,270 noisy stairs called the Stairs of Repentance, blown out of the mountain by one of the early monks as a form of penance. When such reflections on the passage of time and mortality hit home, Saint-Exupéry is good company. Wind, Sand & Stars, which supports environmental projects in the desert, offers the Bedouin the alternative, more difficult, route to the top: a “seven steps of repentance” sign by wild camels to return to their familiar watering holes before their humps shrink. TheBedouinsnowtoldusifwecould  

We prepare for bed, and the guides laugh as we fret that we might find a scorpion or snake in our sleeping bags of course facing the Gulf of Aqaba, as does he for much of the summer. But when the temperatures start to drop in autumn, Aïd says he still feels the strong pull to return to the desert, wandering for weeks with his camels.

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